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GEORGE WASHINGTON

AN ADDRESS
BY
LUCIUS M. CUTHBERT



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AN ADDRESS

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LUCIUS M. CUTHBERT

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GEORGE WASHINGTON

It seems an amazing and incomprehensible statement, to assert that Washington was, in any manner, responsible for the establishment of the British and German empires. Yet it is true that, in 1754, he laid the solid, if then unseen, foundations upon which those empires were based and which subsequently received, through Disraeli and Bismarck for their respective governments, the perfected forms of imperial greatness.

The incident referred to, of such far-reaching importance, was the attack by Washington, then in the service of the royal Governor of Virginia, with two companies of enlisted frontiersmen and Indians, upon the French, at a point on the Monongahela River, near the present site of Pittsburg.

This event is admitted by historians to have been "the first certain slaughter" of the Seven Years' War between Prussia and Eng-

land, on the one side, and France, Austria, Russia, Sweden, and Saxony, on the other; and which, with the maritime and colonial wars between England and France, enveloped Europe and America, and was not concluded until the Treaty of Ghent was signed in 1814.

The results of those sixty years of warfare were, perhaps, the most important in the history of the world, as they involved the destruction of the French dominions in Canada and the overthrow of French influence in India, which laid the foundation of the British Empire; the strengthening and extension of the power and sovereignty of Prussia, upon which modern Germany is founded; and the loss of the American colonies to England, which led to the formation of the government of the United States.

Hear what Thackeray says!

“It was strange that, in a savage forest of Pennsylvania, a young Virginian officer should fire a shot and waken up a war that was to last sixty years; which was to cover his own country and pass into Europe; to cost France her American colonies; to sever ours from us, and create the great Western Republic; to rage

over the Old World when extinguished in the New; and, of all the myriads engaged in the vast contest, to leave the prize of the greatest fame with him who struck the first blow."

Of that epoch-making period Voltaire wrote:

"Such was the complication of political interests that a cannon-shot fired in America could give the signal that set Europe in a blaze."

To which our own Parkman replies:

"Not a cannon-shot! But a volley from the hunting-pieces of a few backwoodsmen commanded by George Washington."

Such was the beginning of his career, when only twenty-two years of age, and which continued almost uninterruptedly in the service of his country until his death.

He refers, in his Farewell Address, in touching language to that long term of service:

"Though, in reviewing the incidents of my administration, I am unconscious of intentional error, I am, nevertheless, too sensible of my defects not to think that I may have committed many errors. Whatever they may be, I fervently beseech the Almighty to avert or mitigate the evils to which they may tend.

I shall also carry with me the hope that my country will never cease to view them with indulgence; and that, after forty-five years of my life dedicated to its service with an upright zeal, the faults of incompetent abilities will be consigned to oblivion, as myself must soon be to the mansions of rest."

It is small wonder, then, that in his busy life, with its lofty purposes and devotion to duty, he should have had but little time for study or literary pursuits. And it is of the most trifling importance to us, in view of all he accomplished for his country and mankind, that he should not have been so cultured as Jefferson or Hamilton, or so great a classical scholar as Gladstone. His merits are to be measured by larger standards than those of letters, and his fame rests upon more enduring foundations than literary accomplishments or proficiency in scholarship.

Yet, in preparing his state papers, he exercised that same care and thoroughness which characterized all his methods and actions at momentous periods.

This is well illustrated by the circumstances connected with the preparation of his Farewell

Address, which was issued in 1796. Madison, at Washington's request, prepared the first draft; from which Washington drew up a paper, which he submitted to Hamilton and Jay. Hamilton then prepared another document, entirely new as to form, but the same in substance; which Washington preferred as being "more copious on material points, more dignified on the whole, and with less egotism; less exposed to criticism, and better calculated to meet the eye of discerning readers—foreigners particularly, whose curiosity, I have little doubt, will lead them to inspect it attentively, and to pronounce their opinions on the performance."

The document was then put into the hands of Pickering, Wolcott, and McHenry, with the request, as Pickering says, "that we examine it and note any alterations and corrections which we should think best. We did so. But our notes were very few, and regarded chiefly the grammar and composition." Finally Washington revised the whole, and it was made public.

That address has received the deserved admiration of scholars and statesmen for over a

hundred years. As a literary production, the credit unquestionably belongs to Hamilton. But the sentiments—the living, vital principles—are entirely Washington's.

His own style of composition was, however, clear and direct, with much of the Johnsonian poise and dignity which was very popular with English men of letters at that time. The following extract from a letter, written by him to La Fayette in the February (1783) following his retirement from command of the army, shows the simplicity and purity of his diction and possesses much of literary excellence:

“I have not only retired from all public employment, but I am retiring within myself, and shall be able to view the solitary walks and tread the paths of private life with heart-felt satisfaction. Envious of none, I am determined to be pleased with all; and this, my dear friend, being the order of my march, I will move gently down the stream of life until I sleep with my fathers.”

Washington's expressions, in his Farewell Address, concerning the proper foreign policy for this government are as true and pertinent today as they were in 1796:

“Observe good faith and justice towards all nations. * * * The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign nations is, in extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little political connection as possible. So far as we have already formed engagements, let them be fulfilled with perfect good faith. Here let us stop.”

Absolutely in harmony with those principles is the supposed and reported attitude of President Wilson toward the recent Act of Congress giving vessels engaged in the coastwise trade a preference and favorable discrimination in the use of the Panama Canal. And it is an eloquent tribute to the sense of justice and fairness on the part of the people of this country that there should be such a general and emphatic desire that our government fulfill, with perfect good faith, the terms of the Hay-Pauncefote Treaty. Whatever material advantage may be lost to the interests involved is compensated a thousand fold by the preservation of our national reputation and the consciousness of our own rectitude.

In this connection it may not be amiss to say that it is clearly the duty of every citizen,

at this time, regardless of political affiliations, to give his earnest support to the President in his efforts to solve questions of national importance. He has brought about a Tariff reform which may, and it is hoped will, prove a blessing; a Banking and Currency system which is admitted to have many excellent features; and he is now seeking to solve the main questions that have complicated the relations between business and the government, and which, admittedly, have not received any very statesmanlike treatment hitherto. And what is most significant and encouraging is the undertone of friendliness, in his recent Message, toward the larger business interests of the country and of sympathy with them in a predicament which is not altogether of their own making; as are, also, his declarations that the prosperity of the railways and the prosperity of the country are inseparable, and that the antagonism between business and the government is over. The tolerant and reconciling temper he has shown is certainly very much within the spirit and teachings of his great predecessor.

Washington's modesty and disinclination for public speaking were very pronounced. On

a certain occasion, when being thanked by the Virginia Legislature for his distinguished services to his country, he was so much embarrassed and disconcerted that he was unable to utter a word; and Speaker Robinson, to relieve the situation, said: "Sit down, Mr. Washington! Your modesty equals your valor; and that surpasses any language I possess."

When delivering his Inaugural Address in New York, in 1789, it is said "he trembled; and several times could scarce make out to read his speech—though it must be supposed he had often read it before."

Fisher Ames, referring to the delivery of his Farewell Address, says:

"He addressed the two Houses in the Senate Chamber. It was a very touching scene and quite of a solemn kind. His aspect grave, almost to sadness; his modesty actually shaking; his voice deep, a little tremulous, and so low as to call for close attention."

And Jefferson said that he had served in the Virginia Legislature with Washington and in Congress with Dr. Franklin, and that he had never known either of them to speak as long as ten minutes at a time.

The power of eloquence as an effective agency seems to lose its importance when considered in connection with Washington and his tremendous influence. He was unquestionably the most influential member of the First Continental Congress, held in Philadelphia in October, 1774, although his name does not appear in its published proceedings. In answer to an inquiry, Patrick Henry said, on his return from that Congress: "If you speak of eloquence, Mr. Rutledge of South Carolina is, by far, the greatest orator; but if you speak of solid information and sound judgment, Colonel Washington is unquestionably the greatest man on that floor."

Perhaps no character in the history of our country stands as a more direct contrast to certain public men in high government offices today than Washington. This is shown, not only by his calmness, moderation, and dignified reticence, but in even a more emphatic manner by his attitude toward the salaries and emoluments of the various public offices he held. Not only were they deemed ample remuneration for his services, when he did accept them, but he seemed always anxious to

avoid the necessity of accepting any compensation.

It is a well-known fact that he served the entire eight years, when in command of the Revolutionary forces, without pay. And he pursued the same policy when he became President.

What could be more disinterested and patriotic than the following expressions in his first Inaugural Address; and what a comment they contain upon the undignified efforts of some of our public men to increase their revenue!

“When I was first honored with a call into the service of my country, then on the eve of an arduous struggle for its liberties, the light in which I contemplated my duty required that I should renounce every pecuniary compensation. From this resolution I have in no instance departed. And, being still under the impressions which produced it, I must decline, as inapplicable to myself, any share in the personal emoluments which may be indispensably included in a permanent provision for the Executive Department; and must accordingly pray that the pecuniary estimates for the station in which I am placed may, during my

continuance in it, be limited to such actual expenditures as the public good may be thought to require."

The State of Virginia presented him with certain shares of stock in the Potomac Company as a testimonial of the esteem of the people of the state. With a delicacy which characterized all of his actions, he accepted the public gift, only because he feared that by declining it he might hurt the feelings of his people. But he left the entire amount, by his will, for the establishment of a university in the District of Columbia.

Ever since his death there has been a process of hero-building going on which tends to make a demigod and almost mythical character of one whose chief beauty and strength lay in his simplicity and naturalness.

This same tendency is at work with the memories of Franklin and Lincoln; and will, in the course of time, if carried to its logical conclusion, place these great and most beneficent of men in the same class with Jupiter, Wotan, and King Arthur. With Washington, this spirit showed itself, at an early day, in the biography of that worthy, but overzealous,

writer, the Revd. Weems of cherry-tree fame. Of Franklin there have been innumerable exaggerated eulogies, of no historical value when compared with his own unpretentious autobiography, where we see him, walking down Broad Street, "with a roll under each arm, and devouring a third."

Washington was one of the most human of men. Of graceful and commanding stature, he was fond of dancing, riding, and athletic sports. Kind and gentle in manner, he was, nevertheless, overwhelming in his wrath when aroused by righteous indignation. General Scott, who was with him at the battle of Monmouth, says that when Washington met General Charles Lee and his troops, retreating from the English, "he swore like an Angel from Heaven."

After the discovery of the treachery of his former Attorney-General, and then Secretary of State, Edmund Randolph, in his intrigue with France, he laid the whole matter before his cabinet; and Pickering, who was present as Secretary of War, thus describes the scene:

"At this point Washington rose to his feet—the pamphlet in his hand—his whole aspect

and manner showing the storm that was gathering, and his voice rising as he spoke."

And then, after reciting the details of the unpleasant event, Pickering continues:

"As he uttered these last words, he threw the pamphlet down, and gave way to a terrific burst of denunciation in unrestrained expressions. He then calmly resumed his seat. The storm was over. With perfect serenity other business was entered upon, and the name or thought of Edmund Randolph was never again suffered to disturb his temper."

It was only natural that such a strong, uncompromising and consistently upright character as Washington should create many enemies. And his were numerous, and of all grades. Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, Edmund Randolph, of course, Generals Gates and Charles Lee, Dr. Benjamin Rush, Thomas Payne, and many of inferior rank, were of the number. None could, or did, accuse him of dishonesty; but they were none the less bitter in their attacks, which were prompted mainly by envy, jealousy or disappointment; and which he felt very keenly.

His answer to these attacks was character-

istic of his patriotic and long-suffering nature:

“My temper leads me to peace and harmony with all men; and it is peculiarly my wish to avoid any feuds or dissensions with those who are embarked in the same great national interest with myself; as every difference of this kind must, in its consequence, be very injurious.”

And again he said:

“I am gliding down the stream of life, and wish, as is natural, that my remaining days may be undisturbed and tranquil; and, conscious of my integrity, I would willingly hope that nothing would occur tending to give me anxiety. But should anything present itself, in this or other publication, I shall never undertake the task of recrimination; nor do I know that I should ever enter upon my justification.”

But while he made enemies, he left none at his death. All parties—Whigs and Democrats, Republicans and Federalists—united in doing him honor.

At the inauguration of his successor, John Adams (March 4, 1797), an eyewitness states that when Washington introduced Adams he

proceeded to read a brief valedictory, and thus describes the scene:

“The most profound silence greeted him, as if the great assembly desired to hear him breathe and catch his breath in homage of their hearts. Mr. Adams covered his face with both his hands; the sleeves of his coat and his hands were covered with tears. Then, when strong, nervous sobs broke loose, when tears covered the faces—then the great man was shaken. I never took my eyes from his face. Large drops fell from his cheeks.”

What more glowing tribute could be paid to his greatness and usefulness than the language of Talleyrand, French Minister of Foreign Affairs, in his report on the occasion of Washington's death:

“The man who, amid the decadence of modern ages, first dared believe that he could inspire degenerate nations with courage to rise to the level of republican virtues, lived for all nations and for all countries.”

His life has taught the great lesson that virtue is the chief attribute of true heroism, and that the only ambition worthy of man is that which is purified by patriotism.

Webster found in him and his teachings the inspiration for his noblest flights of oratory. And the hold which Lincoln has upon the hearts of the people today is attributable to the fact that he, more than any other American, possessed the same attributes and was governed by the same motives and principles as Washington.

In him were concentrated, little of genius and no wit, but the simple virtues of integrity, patience, courage and loyalty; and these he placed unreservedly at the disposal of his country.

Alexanders, Caesars and Napoleons flash through the pages of history, like meteors across a cloudless night-sky; dazzling in their brilliancy, but leaving behind them little else than wonder, amazement and admiration. But Washington, like the glorious sun, has spread the rays of his beneficent and life-giving influence for the benefit of all nations and all times; and has shown that the grandest thing in the world, next to the radiance that flows from the Almighty Throne, is the light of a noble and beautiful life, wrapping itself in benediction round the destinies of men.



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